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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses practices, issues, and trends in Japanese middle school education that have bearing on U.S. education, grouping them into four categories. Section 1, "School Reform," discusses central control of education, opportunities for student creativity, improved teacher education, and the examination system. Section 2, "Centralization," observes Japan's move toward decentralization while the United States concurrently moves away from decentralization. Section 3, "School Organization and the Use of Time," describes middle school grade levels, block scheduling, the school year, team teaching, teacher collaboration, looping, and student uniforms. Section 4, "Curriculum," discusses how the Japanese school curricula differs from U.S. curricula. Some of the differences are that in Japan, the academic curriculum is determined by the Ministry of Japan, while in the U.S., it is determined by local boards of education. In Japan, unlike the U.S., there are academic requirements for music, art, and moral education. Japan has less focus on teamwork and cooperative learning. In recent years, both countries have increased technology use in the schools. Section 5, "Equity Issues," explains that educational equity has different meanings in the two countries. In the U.S., the concept of individualism ties in with the concept of equal educational opportunity, with students grouped by their ability and taught curricula in keeping with an individual student's development. Equal opportunity in Japan means providing each student with the same contents to learn, equal financial support, and equal physical facilities. (SM)

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THE JAPANESE MIDDLE SCHOOLS: A REFLECTION ON PRACTICES, ISSUES AND TRENDS

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Over the past fifteen years, I have noted a number of interesting practices, issues, and trends in Japanese middle school education. In the United States we see many of these similar practices, issues and trends taking place. While the United States cannot take unadulterated the ways of the Japanese middle schools, the study of them do provide us with a means of looking at ourselves. In the following paragraphs I will identify and discuss those practices, trends and issues in Japanese middle school education that have a bearing on American education. For discussion purposes, I group these into four categories: school reform, school organization, curriculum, and equity issues. However, the categories do overlap such that discussion of one category invariably involves another.

School Reform

In the early eighties Japan experienced a wrath of school violence including bullying (*ijime*) by students, physical attacks upon students and teachers, and suicides by students. Related to school violence was the refusal of students to go to school. Students were chronically absent and the reason given was "I hate school." Kitamachi middle school was not exempt from this kind of occurrences. The year before my study, the school had experienced violence by the students. This resulted in increased attention to the homeroom and club activities by the school personnel. My host

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teacher, who was a homeroom teacher, informed me that the teachers need to spend more time with the students to provide them guidance and identify. The responsibilities of the homeroom teachers were heightened by the outbreak of violence and increased school absenteeism. In the United States, in April and May 1999, we see an extreme form of school violence-the shooting of teachers and students by other students. As of this writing the causes of the violence are not known. One of the reasons given was that the violent students were "outcasts" and were made fun of by their fellow students. If this is true then what we are witnessing is an American form of bullying or *ijime*. Other reasons given included the ready availability of guns and the portrayal of violence on television and the movies. An outcry by some has been for greater gun control and increased monitoring of violence in movies and television. Bullying in Japan and the United States has resulted in calls in both countries for greater attention by school personnel to the circumstances resulting in bullying (Barone, 1997; Schoppa, 1991) In Japan, the public demanded reforms in education to correct the situation. However, the major interest groups did not see the causes, and hence solutions, in the same way. Some of the items that certain groups wanted reformed included: central control of education, opportunities for student creativity, improved education of teachers, and the examination system.

Centralization. Interestingly, the business and economic community in Japan believes that a loosening of control of the government over education would favor diversity, creativity, and internationalization (Schoppa, 1991), whereas in the United States,

we find a leaning towards centralization by those who feel that more centralization would lead to better educated students to handle the country's business and hence compete more favorably in the international market place. Instead of centralization per se, the discussion has taken on the rhetoric of the need for national standards, the need for common goals, the need for national identify, and the need for accountability by the schools. (Banks, 1996; Goodlad, 1984; Hirsch, Jr., 1994).

In theory, in the United States local school boards decide the curricula for their constituents, but in fact textbook companies play a very large role in deciding the curricula. However, they are supported by the large state adoptions, for these large adoptions greatly influence what the publishers will publish. This means the curricula for the nation is largely decided by selected states and the major publishing company.

In the United States, we see less influence of the professional educators in national curricula decisions than in Japan. In Japan, key educational researchers and teachers are invariably appointed to working bodies that make decisions for curricula. In addition, these same personnel are also textbook writers. Consequently, we see a more direct connection between research results and educational changes in the courses of study.

The extent of the central government's role in the establishment of the middle school's curricula was previously described. Also indicated were the activities of the prefectural and municipal school boards, and school-level personnel in this process of curriculum construction. The curriculum in Japan is commonly

referred to as a centrally controlled and therefore a "top-down" type of curriculum. To the contrary, the curriculum formation process is a group interaction process with the Ministry acting as the leader of the group, and the one authorized by law to make final decisions. This process is depicted in Figure 11.

Figure 11

Not only is there interaction between the Ministry and all concerned groups, but there is also communication among the various groups. It is only after this extensive dialogue among interested groups and the ministry (generally, over a ten year period), and when some kind of overall consensus is reached by all concerned is the basic curriculum written by the Ministry. This type of process has the advantage of resulting in a curriculum which all interested parties help shape and thereby they are committed to implementing it. On the other hand, this process is very time consuming. For this process, a ten year cycle for curriculum revision provided by the government is not unreasonable. Also compromises are bound to be made before consensus is reached. This may or may not be a disadvantage depending on one's viewpoint. A definite advantage of this process is that the curriculum that emerges conforms to an official standard and assures that "children throughout the nation are exposed to a common body of knowledge" (Cummings, 1980), something that is currently lacking in the United States.

The opposite pole to centralization of education is parent and community control. In the United States, at the same time that we hear cries for more common education and national standards and

goals, we hear the pleas for more parent and community control. We see this in the "magnet school" concept across the nation and in "school-based community management" in Hawaii.

A criticism of the middle school movement in the United States is that the schools are not responding to their constituency--namely the parents of the students. (Williamson & Johnston, 1999). It will be interesting to see whether parents and schools do control education or does the educational institution, that is to say those who are responsible for the education of the students.

In the Revised Courses of Study, there is made available the possibility of variations to communities that have a special need. This is most evident in the examination system. Here, the schools give the exams and decide on who to accept. (TIMSS, 1996)

Teacher Education. One of the reforms recommended for beginning teachers was a year of training during their first year of teaching. This training consists of at least sixty days of in-school training and thirty days of off-campus training. The in-school training conducted by a senior faculty member offers advise to the new teacher on class management and teaching techniques. The off-campus includes various activities including lectures, overnight training camp, and visits to other schools. This training system was implemented in 1989 for the middle school teacher.

This interest and recognition of the plight and support needed by beginning teachers has been recognized by school systems, teacher education institutions, and government agencies (Morey, 1992) in the United States. One can expect to see various types of

experimentation of appropriate teaching models to use with this body of teachers.

School Organization and the Use of Time

A major reform movement in the United States has been the reorganization of the "middle grades" into unique grade levels. These grade levels then become an entity within themselves. It is no longer a matter of whether they are an extension of the primary grades or preparatory grounds for high school. Orthodoxy has it that the middle school grades must be grades six, seven and eight. However, other successful middle schools have been organized using different grades. (Williamson & Johnston, 1999). In Japan, since Postwar times, the organization of the primary and secondary schools was set as 6-3-3, that is, the first six grades constituted the primary grades, grades seven, eight, and nine constituted the middle grades, and grades nine through twelve made up the high school.

Another change in organization in the United States is the introduction of "block scheduling" wherein the school day is organized into various blocks of time. This allowed flexibility to those classes that needed to meet longer than the conventional fifty minutes. One of the consequences of "block scheduling" is that it reduced the number of times students needed to change from one class to another. As a result, studies show that the amount of student misbehavior was reduced (Queen & Gaskey, 1997). Since students switch classes less often, this appears to created a less frenzied atmosphere. The passing of classes perhaps invites misbehavior such as bullying in the hallways.

Another reason for "block scheduling" is that it allowed for teachers to work together during a given block of time, thereby making feasible the collaboration among teachers.

The variation in schedules within middle schools in the United States continues to be quite diverse. Some of them are highly individualized and the reasons for their particular variation is not all that obvious.

Throughout the United States, we see a longer school year. Instead of a three months long summer vacation, we see schools beginning in August and having longer spring and winter breaks. Since schools are responsible for the school calendar, we see a variety of year-long schools appearing. One of the reasons for the longer school year is to allow students more time to learn. In contrast, in Japan where the number of days of schooling is much greater than the United States, the decision was made by the government to lessen the number of days of schooling. Beginning in 1993, the fourth Saturday was made a school holiday. The reason? Teachers tell me that this will make it possible for students and families to enjoy a better life.

Another characteristic of the middle school movement in the United States has been the formation of a team of teachers working with a set group of students. This use of team teaching is to make it possible for students to identify with a group of teachers and for teachers to integrate their teaching of subject matter. With the formation of these teams we see "collaborative" or "cooperative" teaching and learning by both teachers and students. Students experience being part of a group and learn from each other with this

kind of configuration in the classroom. One of the advantages of this cooperative-type of learning is the feasibility of having students of varying abilities work together.

Of interest is the fact that teachers in Japan do work cooperatively. They meet frequently and plan activities for their grade levels and beyond. One of the reasons for this type of activity is that teachers share a common office and even have desks of the same grade levels grouped together. Another reason is that teachers generally teach only four classes per day and hence have more time for planning than their United States counterparts.

The need for student identity in Japan appears less great since the students remain in the same group throughout the school year. For most of their instruction, they remain in the same classroom. It is the teacher that moves from classroom to classroom.

In the United States a trend to developing a group identity is the "looping" practice where the teacher remains with a group of students for a longer time duration--say two years. In addition, such looping is said to develop an emotional bond between teachers and students (Liu, 1997). Looping is a common practice in Japan where the teacher remains with a group of students during their three years in middle school.

Another developing trend is the use of uniforms for different grade levels to gel together the students and to make feel a part of a group with which to identify. Interestingly, some private schools in Japan now allow students to decide whether to wear uniforms or not. However, for identification purposes, the students must wear their school pin.

The Curriculum

The school curriculum in Japan is made up of three components: academic, non-academic and special activities. In the United States, in general we have a curricula that is essentially the academic curricula and extra-curricula activities, although some prefer the term co-curricular activities. In the sense that the co-curricula activities are not required activities they, in a very strict sense, are not part of the regular curricula. Another factor to suggest that these co-curricula activities are not part of the regular activities is that students may be removed from participating in them because of poor performance in an academic subject.

In Japan the academic curricula is determined by the Ministry of Japan. In the United States, the academic curricula is determined the local board of education. In the state of Hawaii, because there is a single board of education for the entire state, the curricula is essentially state controlled. However, currently it is possible for schools to ask for exemptions which are usually granted.

Compared to that in the United States, one of the differences in the academic program in Japan is the requirements of music, art, and moral education. Another is the integration of the topics of geometry, algebra, and probability with statistics in the study of mathematics. There are no separate courses in mathematics that deal with remediation, gifted and talented, and applications. These areas of mathematics are integrated in the Courses of Study and textbooks, and hence in the teachers' teaching. Teachers in Japan attend less to the practical aspects of mathematics. (TIMSS, 1996). While both countries focus on problem solving, it appears that teachers in the

United States interpret this more to mean solving real and applied problems, to the Japanese, this means more to utilize the open-ended approach to solving problems--real or academic.

With the recent gun shootings at United States schools there is concern about the lack of the teaching of morals in the schools. Should schools decide to institute the teaching of morals, the question remains as to the impact it will have with students. In an exploratory study, Gayer (1999) found that the students in a middle school tend to listen to parents first, peers second, and teachers last. In Japan, since school is seen as an extension of the family, one would expect the impact of moral instruction in the schools would be greater in Japan than in the United States.

There is great concern in the United States of the middle school students' "raging hormones." So much so that some are concerned that the schools are not attending to the students' learning of academics. Such schools are criticized for only focusing on how good the students are feeling about themselves. In recent times there is even more criticism. Another criticism has been the emphasis on developing social skill by using cooperative teaching techniques where the objectives are on the learning of social skills, such as team work, rather than on the traditional subject matter (Williamson & Johnston, 1999).

Because Japanese instruction does not focus on the individual students, but rather on the group, there appears to be less concern with whether the Japanese pupil is feeling good about himself. There is also less of a need to focus on teamwork and cooperative learning

since the students' general cultural upbringing emphasizes the primacy of the group.

Although the United States does not have a nationwide curriculum, there is a growing concern for the need of teaching a "common core." Some feel that such a core is needed for a democratic society. (Banks, 1998; Good, 1984; Hirsch, Jr., 1994). Since the mobility of the nation is great (twenty percent of the population moves ever year), there is also a practical reason for a national core. Such a core would make the movement of students from school to school easier.

Over the last ten years the use of technology in the schools has increased in both Japan and the United States. In Japan, this change can be seen indirectly by the increased number of computers that the Ministry has made available to the middle schools. In 1985, it made available micro-computers to 12.8% of the middle schools, and in 1991, it made them available to 86.1%. In the wealthy middle school, Keio Chutobu, in 1983, some of the teachers were getting involved in learning how to teach with computers, in 1998, students had class times devoted to working with computers. Available for students' use is a computer lab where as a class they go to use.

In the United States we also see an upsurge in the use of computers in the schools. In some cases the computers are in the classrooms, and in others they are all in a computer lab where teachers sign up for the entire class's use. If schools are in wealthy districts they are more apt to have more computer facilities.

Equity Issues

To the Japanese, providing each student an equal opportunity to learn is fair and democratic. When interpreted in the school context this means providing each student with the same contents to learn. Hence the idea of streaming students would be considered undemocratic and unfair. To insure that all students have equal opportunity to learn, the parents have accepted the idea of government controlling matters to be sure that all pupils are treated equally. This equality of treatment goes beyond students having the same curriculum. This also includes equal financial support and physical facilities. It includes the uniform quality of the teachers and administrators. One way this is enforced is by having national standards for teacher certification and the rotation of school personnel so that the unpopular regions are not left with the least desired teachers and administrators.

Although the 1989 Revised Courses of Study allows for the streaming of classes, this in fact has not materialized at Kitamachi. Not even gifted and talented classes were available although there has been much discussion for the Japanese educational system to cultivate creativity. I surmise parents continue to reject this type of organization in the belief that it is unfair and undemocratic, and in addition, it would have a negative impact on the students and their families. It would be a cause for shame and have a self-fulfilling prophesy for the students.

In the United States the concept of individualism, that is, developing a students to their fullest potential, is tied in with the concept of equal educational opportunity. It is believed that a school that allows students to develop to their fullest potential is democratic

and fair. The opportunity to develop to their fullest opportunity is what is important. Hence students should be grouped by their ability and taught a curricula in keeping with the students development. As a result of this belief, schools have instituted classes for "gifted and talented" students.

Individuality in the United States has given way somewhat to group identity. This has occurred with the introduction of school uniforms in some schools, and this trend continues to grow. The increased use of cooperative group learning is another manifestation of giving up individualism to the group.

Conclusions

In reviewing the practices, issues and trends that permeated the Japanese and American middle schools during the past fifteen years, I note that these two countries seem to be moving closer to being alike in some ways while remaining quite different in others. It will be of interest to see how much alike and different they will be ten to twenty years from now. We have a hint that the number of school days of the two may be more alike given that in the year 2003, Saturday classes for the Japanese will be a thing of the past. On the other hand, we continue to see more schools in the United States plan for a longer school year.

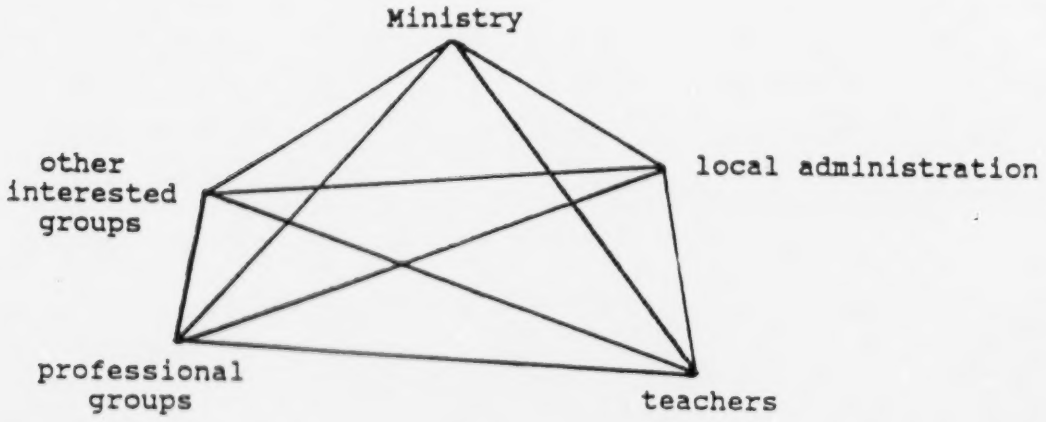

Figure 11 The Curriculum Building Process of Japan

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